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Moldovan Presidential Elections Driven by Insecurity Not Geopolitics

President-elect Sandu May Have Found a Cure against Populism

Dumitru Minzarari

World media have hailed the victory of Maia Sandu in the Moldovan presidential elections on 15 November. They celebrated it as a triumph of democracy and pro-Western preferences over post-Soviet cronyism, authoritarianism and Russian apologists. The reality is more complex while there are few reasons for optimism. Sandu's victory is a fragile one as the conditions that delivered it were temporary only. However, she may have unwittingly discovered how to attract voters who traditionally preferred Russia-backed candidates. The EU would benefit by learning from this accidental solution, which is of value regionwide, and deriving from it a thought-out strategy to more effectively support and protect genuine democratic transformation in Moldova and the post-Soviet area.

The good news is that Sandu's victory is indeed transformative, at least to some extent, for both Moldova and the wider region. It is still unusual for a pure technocrat, schooled in the West, to win nationwide competitive elections against seasoned veterans of national politics and the incumbent by building a party from scratch in just a few years. The fact that Sandu won these elections as a woman in a country as conservative as Moldova is revealing of the ongoing social transformation in the region. Moreover, she won by a significant margin (57.72% vs 42.28%) of votes against a candidate who had the financial and political backing of the Russian Federation. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and other EU officials have congratulated Sandu

on her victory and offered EU support to advance reforms in Moldova.

A Fragile Victory

The bad news is the somewhat chance nature of this victory. There were several overlapping factors that favoured Sandu. One of them was the feud that the incumbent president, Igor Dodon, waged against Renato Usatîi, a relative newcomer to Moldovan politics. Usatîi chipped away at Dodon's support base of pro-Russian and conservative voters. His own party — Our Party — was affiliated with that of the nationalist Russian politician Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. In a recent public appearance,



Table

Comparative data on Moldova's presidential elections in 2016 and 2020, number of validated votes

Contenders	2016, I round	2020, I round	2016, II round	2020, II round
Igor Dodon	680,550	439,866	834,081	690,615
Maia Sandu	549,152	487,635	766,593	943,006
<i>Difference</i>	131,398	-47,769	67,488	-252,391
Renato Usatii	85,466*	227,939	—	—
Violeta Ivanov	—	87,542	—	—
Total voters	1,418,518	1,348,719	1,600,674	1,633,621

* Contender was a member of Usatii's party

Sources: Central Electoral Commission and the Association for Participatory Democracy (ADEPT).

Zhirinovsky confirmed the affiliation and said that a phone call with the Kremlin had forced him to end any cooperation.

Dodon used his connections in the Kremlin to put pressure on Usatii to give up politics; Zhirinovsky criticized that, arguing that the Kremlin should have worked with both politicians. In response, Usatii ran an aggressive campaign against Dodon, accusing him of corruption. Coming from a politician affiliated with the West, that accusation would not sound credible to Russian sympathizers. But it is a different case altogether when a pro-Russian politician makes the accusation.

Usatii would have discredited himself politically if he had asked his followers to vote for Dodon in the run-off, having demonized him earlier. He urged his supporters to vote against Dodon, claiming pressure from the Russian intelligence services. Sergey Naryshkin, the head of Russia's foreign intelligence service (SVR), appeared to substantiate that claim. He alleged that the West would seek to contest Dodon's victory by inciting street protests and a "coloured revolution". Making such an announcement was an extreme and unprecedented public move by the SVR — one that confirmed it was backing Dodon. In the end, Usatii's impact on the elections was, in effect, to weaken Dodon, thereby increasing the credibility of Sandu's campaign.

Another factor that strongly contributed to Sandu's victory was the aggressive rhetoric that Dodon short-sightedly used after the first round. The incumbent vocally attacked the diaspora, which he labelled a "parallel electorate", for voting differently from the rest of the country — that is, largely for Sandu (70% vs 3.6%). This led to an unprecedented mobilization of the Moldovan diaspora in the West. If some 150,000 voters went to polling stations outside Moldova on 1 November, more than 260,000 people voted in the run-off two weeks later, largely for Sandu (~93%). The mobilization of Moldovans living abroad encouraged voting at home — indirectly benefiting Sandu — as voter turnout was considerably higher in the second round (Table 1).

A third important factor that undermined Dodon's chances of victory was Russia itself. As president, Dodon travelled repeatedly to Moscow. He routinely returned home with promises of economic assistance and trade facilitation for Moldova's agricultural sector. Most of those promises were not kept. Every now and then, Moldovan media would report — similar to dispatches from the front about casualties — that more Moldovan agricultural products had been returned by the Russian authorities or destroyed.

In fact, Russia President Vladimir Putin — usually a stickler for getting his facts right — recently stated that economically, Mol-

dova is closely tied to Russia. The reality could not be more different. Data show that just over 8% of Moldovan exports went to Russia in 2019, more than 60% to EU countries and 27% to other countries. Thus, the Russian gate to prosperity is increasingly becoming a myth for the Moldovan people. If in 2019 the public largely perceived Russia as Moldova's most important economic partner and the EU the second-most important, the reverse was true in 2020.

Winning over Conservatives and Populists

There are strong reasons to believe that it is economics, not geopolitics, that determines how the Moldovan electorate largely votes. Voters assess the risk to their welfare posed by the candidates — linking them to Russia or the West as labels of convenience — in order to judge which might make them economically better off.

Nevertheless, the three factors listed above can easily turn to Sandu's disadvantage. Official data show that without the diaspora vote, Sandu had a shaky lead of 27,000 votes (1.7%) among the home electorate. This is despite her having successfully attracted support from among Usatii's voter base — less than half of his more than 227,000 votes (the rest apparently voted for Dodon). She also received well over half of the more than 87,000 populist votes cast for Violeta Ivanov.

Ivanov represents the Moldovan oligarch Ilan Șor, who fled the country amid credible accusations of involvement in embezzling US\$1 billion in Moldovan budget funds. His supporters, mainly from the district and town of Orhei, where he once was mayor, revealed that they did not care whether Șor had stolen public money, just as long as he shared it. This indicates just how desperately many Moldovan citizens are seeking local solutions in order to survive.

Maia Sandu's victory was due mainly to her successfully addressing the concerns of parts of Șor's populist electorate and Usatii's conservative one. It is the first time

that a genuinely pro-European politician in Moldova — and one who is clearly perceived by voters as Western-affiliated — has been able to engage the traditionally conservative and even pro-Russian electorate. Surprisingly, she drew votes from Russian speakers, as can be seen from voting patterns.

Sandu's chosen strategy was to avoid the East-West geopolitical dichotomy and to focus instead on the everyday challenges the population faces — state corruption and the misappropriation of public goods — and it worked well for her. Indeed, a sizable segment of Moldovan voters appears less responsive to appeals for democracy and European integration. This not only sends a strong signal to Moldovan politicians; it also reveals to both the region and Moldova's Western partners that there is fatigue over value-based rhetoric and demand for value-based actions.

To a certain degree, the democratic idea has been discredited by generations of Moldovan politicians who have stolen and misused public goods under the slogan of democracy. But there is also a more instrumental explanation — namely, democracy has weak appeal to the critical mass of voters whose support Sandu needed to seal her victory.

The level of national economic development affects the social values and political preferences of the people. Western voters may prioritize individual freedoms over cheap food because in their country the latter is not in scarce supply. By contrast, voters in transition countries are likely to choose a strong leader or cheap food over individual freedoms if their country is facing political instability and economic hardship. As people become more secure materially, the chances of their becoming cognitively autonomous and then socially independent increase.

Furthermore, an audience tends to assess a speaker's credibility based on a perceived commonality of interests or to what extent the speaker is trusted to represent its interests. After Usatii had discredited Dodon as corrupt and not sharing the spoils, his supporters lost confidence in the incumbent.

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But why did a significant part of this conservative and populist group vote for Dodon nonetheless? Probably because of the different levels of risk aversion: the larger segment of Usatii supporters who switched to Dodon was likely more risk-averse than the smaller segment that voted for Sandu. Even though the former knew that Dodon was corrupt, they continued to associate him with Russia owing to the Kremlin signals, including Putin's endorsement. These voters viewed Sandu as posing an unknown risk and preferred to opt for the status quo by voting for Dodon.

The insecurities of this electorate have been generated by Kremlin influence operations via the Russian-language media in Moldova. Russia has demonized the West – culturally and politically – claiming the threat of a NATO invasion, the unfreezing of the Transnistrian conflict and alleging that the EU has outlawed the terms “mother” and “father”. Election campaigners affiliated with Dodon and pro-Russian actors accused Sandu of being a lesbian, which does not sit well with the largely conservative Moldovan electorate. Many conservative voters were made to believe that Sandu is likely to opt for reunification with Romania, thereby giving up Moldovan statehood. Or they were manipulated into believing the false claim that Moldova depends economically on Russia. But by addressing concrete concerns and risks rather than focusing on their associated West-East labels, Sandu managed to ameliorate these insecurities. Her newly won supporters were less worried about security risks and more attracted to the expected economic gains, which they perceived as more likely to materialize under a less corrupt president. This allowed Sandu to tap into Usatii's conservative and Șor's populist voter base.

Outlook

While the presidential post is mainly of symbolic value in Moldova's parliamentary system, it politically empowers the incumbent owing to the legitimacy endowed by

the popular vote. Under the Constitution and other laws, the president is the commander-in-chief of Moldova's armed forces and has a considerable say in the country's foreign and security policies, as well as the conditional right to dissolve the parliament. However, Dodon may still be able to undermine his successor through his control over the Socialist Party faction, which is the largest in the parliament.

Moldova now provides an opportunity for the EU to start being a strategic “player rather than the playground”. The EU needs to understand that the political processes in its neighbourhood are subject to huge authoritarian pressure from Russia; no politician or party in the post-Soviet area can withstand that pressure alone and undertake genuine democratic transformations. The fate of Armenia's prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan, who is disliked by Russia, could easily be repeated in the case of Maia Sandu. Indeed, there is a high likelihood that Russia will use its leverage in Moldova to undermine Sandu and then try to replace her, as it did last year.

The EU should throw its full support behind Sandu and thereby protect the current opening towards genuine democratic transformation in Moldova. It needs to engage dynamically with the conservatives in Moldova at the grassroots, winning hearts and minds. Given Moldovans' exposure to Russian disinformation, such engagement should address the fears among conservatives, associated with Moldovan rapprochement with the West. Ideally, this would be done through a number of EU targeted projects, carried out under the auspices of President Sandu, that address the insecurities and needs of the risk-averse electorate. A preliminary assessment would have to be conducted to identify and target the main insecurities so as to increase the impact of the projects. The underlying logic is that the greater the conservatives' trust in the EU, the more likely they are to vote for local democratic politicians. These insights could be useful for EU work in other post-Soviet countries as well.

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